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King Coal Highway supporters asking \$66.9 million in federal dollars for project

By CHARLES OWENS
Bluefield Daily Telegraph

WASHINGTON — Despite the current budget crisis in Washington, supporters of the King Coal Highway are still seeking millions in additional federal dollars to help create a useable segment of the future four-lane corridor in Mercer County.

Members of the King Coal Highway Authority were in Washington Thursday where they requested \$66.9 million in federal funding to help create a 2.39 mile usable section of the local Interstate 73/74/75 corridor linking Stoney Ridge with Route 123, and the area near the Mercer County Airport.

The authority members met with U.S. Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., U.S. Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., and staff members representing U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va. The delegation of Mercer, McDowell, Mingo and Wayne county officials also requested \$20 million to help build the long-planned interchange of the King Coal Highway and the Coalfields Expressway at the Indian Ridge Industrial Park in Welch.

“We are feeling optimistic and hopeful,” Mercer County Circuit Court Clerk Julie Ball, who made the trip to Washington for a second year in support of the King Coal Highway, said. “I feel for sure that they will give us a letter of support, and of course they always tell us that we need to go to our state (representatives) to get some of those discretionary funds. We are going to have a meeting with (Highway) Commissioner (Paul) Mattox.”

Christine West, a member of the authority board who recently had the new twin interstate bridges at Stoney Ridge named after her, said she too viewed Thursday’s meeting as a positive.

“We feel like we had a better presentation, and a clear conversation with all of our members and staff,” West said. “They were very cordial and helpful to us. This was a meeting where we feel like there was more points on our side that we haven’t pointed out to them before. We feel like our trip has been successful to the point that we’ve delivered our message.”

And West also used Thursday’s meeting with the lawmakers as an opportunity to push for other regional improvement projects, including support for the Stafford Drive Flood Control Project and downtown revitalization projects for the city of Princeton.

The delegation is now working to schedule a meeting with Mattox, and will request a high-priority funding status for the King Coal Highway on the state level, according to King Coal Highway

Authority Executive Director Mike Mitchem.

“They also said there is a possibility of some TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) funds that are to become available,” Mitchem said. “There is quite a few million (dollars) in TIGER funds that we can apply for. They also talked to us about the Blue Ribbon Commission possibly coming up with some bonding for the states.”

Mitchem said construction of the King Coal Highway also would lead to new home and business construction outside of the flood plane.

The group also requested \$158 million Thursday for two segments of the King Coal Highway in Mingo County, including a 5.3 mile section from Mary Taylor Mountain to Buffalo Mountain and \$18 million for the Sharon Heights Connector near Gilbert.

The group also is seeking another \$77.3 million for the Tolsia Highway segment. The King Coal and Tolsia highways represent the West Virginia corridors of Interstate 73/74.

The King Coal Highway is proposed to extend some 95 miles through Mingo, Wayne, Wyoming, McDowell and Mercer counties with the Tolsia segment from Williamson to Huntington extending another 55 miles.

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